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TRADITION AND TRANSMISSION

It often happens that questions which are put to us show us the necessity of insisting on points which seemed to us sufficiently clear as to have no need of further explanation, and where we would not have thought that there could be matter for some objection deserving to be examined in a more particular manner. Thus we find ourselves led to specify once again the very notion of tradition: it is remarked to us, in fact, that the word "tradition," in its etymological sense, expresses in sum no other idea than that of transmission; we ourselves had moreover already indicated this, quite a long time ago, in the course of our studies on initiation[1], which indeed shows that, for our part, we saw nothing there except something perfectly normal and in agreement with the application that is made of it when one speaks of "tradition" in the sense in which we understand it. However, here is the objection that is raised on this subject: anything whatsoever can be the object of a transmission, including things of the most profane order; then why could one not speak just as well of "tradition" for everything that is thus transmitted, whatever its nature may be, instead of restricting the use of this word to the sole domain that we call "sacred"?

We must first of all make an important remark, which already greatly reduces the scope of this question: it is that, if one were to go back to the origins, this question would not have to be raised, the distinction that it implies being then nonexistent. In fact, there is not properly speaking a profane domain, to which a certain order of things would belong by its very nature; there is only, in reality, a profane point of view, which is, as we have often explained, nothing but the consequence and the product of a kind of degeneration, itself resulting from the downward course of the human cycle and from its gradual distancing from the principial

1 See De la transmission initiatique (December 1930).

state. Therefore, prior to this degeneration, that is to say in sum in the normal state of humanity not yet fallen, one can say that everything truly had a traditional character, because everything was envisaged in its essential dependence with regard to principles and in conformity with them, in such a way that a profane activity, that is to say one separated from these same principles and ignoring them, would have been something inconceivable, even for what falls under what one has agreed to call today "ordinary life," or at least for what could correspond to it at that time, and all the more so for what concerns the sciences, the arts, and the crafts, for which this traditional character was maintained much later and is still found in every civilization of normal type, so much so that one could say that their profane conception is exclusively proper to modern civilization alone, which itself represents, at bottom, nothing but the ultimate degree of the degeneration of which we have just spoken.

If we now consider the state of fact subsequent to this degeneration, we may ask why the idea of tradition excludes from it what is henceforth treated as being of a profane order, that is to say what no longer has a conscious link with principles, in order to apply only to what has kept its original character, with the "transcendent" aspect that it implies. It is not enough to state that usage has willed it thus, at least so long as the confusions and deviations of a completely modern character, to which we have previously drawn attention, had not yet been produced; it is true that usage often modifies the original sense of words, and that it can notably add or subtract something from it; but even this must also have its reason for being, and, above all in a case such as that with which we are dealing here, this reason cannot be indifferent. We may moreover remark that this fact is not limited to the sole languages that employ this Latin word "tradition"; in Hebrew, the word qabbalah, which has exactly the same meaning of transmission, is likewise reserved for the designation of tradition as we understand it, and even, more strictly still, for its esoteric and initiatic part, that is to say for what is most "interior" and most elevated in this tradition, for what constitutes in some way its very spirit; and this again clearly shows that there must be there something more important and more significant than a simple question

of usage in the sense in which one may understand it when it is only a matter of any modifications of current language.

In the first place, there is already an indication that results immediately from this, namely that, as we were saying just now, that to which the name of tradition applies is what is, in sum, in its very foundation, if not necessarily in its outward expression, remained such as it was at the origin; it is therefore indeed a matter of something that has been transmitted, one could say, from an anterior state of humanity to its present state. At the same time, one may remark that the "transcendent" character of everything that is traditional also implies a transmission in another sense, proceeding from the principles themselves so as to be communicated to the human state; and this sense in a certain way joins and obviously completes the preceding one. One could even, by taking up here the terms that we have used elsewhere to expound the symbolism of the cross, speak at once of a "vertical" transmission, from the supra-human to the human, and of a "horizontal" transmission, through the successive states or stages of humanity: the vertical transmission is moreover essentially "intemporal," the horizontal transmission alone implying a chronological succession.

Let us add further that the vertical transmission, which is such when one envisages it from above to below as we have just done, becomes, if one takes it on the contrary from below to above, a "participation" of humanity in the realities of the principial order, a participation which, in fact, is precisely ensured by tradition under all its forms, since it is there that humanity is placed in effective and conscious relation with what is superior to it. There is yet something else: to the character of "transcendence" which essentially belongs to principles, and in which everything that is effectively connected to them participates thereby to some degree, is added a character of "permanence" which expresses the immutability likewise communicated from these same principles, and which is extended as far as possible to their applications, even when these refer to contingent domains. This does not mean, of course, that tradition is not susceptible of "adaptations" conditioned by certain circumstances; but, under these modifications, permanence is always

maintained as to what is essential; and, even when it is a matter of contingencies, these contingencies as such are in some way surpassed and "transformed" by the very fact of their connection with principles.

On the contrary, when one places oneself at the profane point of view, which is characterized, in a way that can moreover only be wholly negative, by the absence of such a connection, one is, if one may say so, in pure contingency, with all that it entails of instability and incessant variability and without any possibility of emerging from it; it is in some way the reign of "fashion," which represents in this respect the most striking image. One may conclude from this that tradition comprises not only everything that is worthy of being transmitted, but even everything that can truly be so, since the rest, what is devoid of traditional character and which consequently falls within the profane point of view, is dominated by change to such a degree that any transmission there soon becomes a pure and simple "anachronism," or a "superstition," in the etymological sense of the word, which no longer corresponds to anything real or valid.

One must now understand why tradition and transmission may be regarded, without any abuse of language, as almost synonymous or equivalent, or why, at the very least, tradition, under whatever aspect one envisages it, constitutes what one could call transmission par excellence. On the other hand, if this idea of transmission is so essentially inherent in the traditional point of view that the latter has legitimately been able to draw from it its very designation, all that we have said of the necessity of a regular transmission for what belongs to this traditional order, and more particularly to the initiatic order which is an integral and even "eminent" part of it, is thereby further reinforced and even acquires a sort of immediate evidence which should, in the eyes of the simplest logic, and without even appealing to more profound considerations, render definitively impossible any contestation on this point, where moreover only "pseudo-initiatic" organizations have an interest, because this transmission is lacking to them, in maintaining equivocation and confusion.

REMARKS ON MATHEMATICAL NOTATION

We have often had occasion to point out that most profane sciences, the only ones that moderns know or even conceive as possible, in reality represent nothing but simple denatured residues of the ancient traditional sciences, in the sense that it is the lowest part of the latter which, having ceased to be put in relation with principles and having thereby lost its true original significance, has come to take on an independent development and to be regarded as a knowledge sufficient unto itself. Modern mathematics does not form an exception in this respect, if one compares it with what the science of numbers and geometry were for the ancients; and, when we speak here of the ancients, one must include even "classical" antiquity, as the slightest study of Pythagorean and Platonic theories suffices to show, or should suffice at least if one did not have to reckon with the extraordinary incomprehension of those who today claim to interpret them; if this incomprehension were not so complete, how could one, for example, maintain the opinion of an "empirical" origin of the sciences in question, whereas, in reality, they appear on the contrary all the more removed from all "empiricism" the further back one goes, just as is moreover the case for every other branch of knowledge?

Modern mathematicians seem to have come to ignore what number truly is, for they reduce their whole science to calculation, which is for them a simple ensemble of more or less artificial procedures, which, in sum, amounts to saying that they replace number by the numeral; moreover, this confusion of number with numeral is so widespread nowadays that one could find it at every moment even in the expressions of everyday language. Now, the numeral is properly nothing more than the garment of the number; we do not even say its body, for it is rather geometric form which, in certain respects, may legitimately be regarded as the true body of number, as the theories of the ancients on polygons and polyhedra, put in direct relation with the symbolism of numbers, show.

We do not wish to say, however, that numerals themselves are entirely arbitrary signs, whose form would have been determined only by the fancy of one or several individuals; it must be for numerical characters as for alphabetic characters, from which they do not even differ in certain languages, and one may apply to the one as well as to the other the notion of a hieroglyphic origin, that is to say ideographic or symbolic, which holds for all scripts without exception.

What is certain is that mathematicians employ in their notation symbols whose meaning they no longer know, and which are like vestiges of forgotten traditions; and what is most serious is that not only do they not ask themselves what this meaning may be, but even that they seem not to want there to be one. In fact, they increasingly tend to regard all notation as a simple "convention," by which they mean something that is posited in a wholly arbitrary manner, which, at bottom, is a veritable impossibility, for one never makes a convention without having some reason for making it, and for making precisely that one rather than any other: it is only to those who are ignorant of this reason that the convention may appear arbitrary, and that is indeed what happens here.

In such a case, it is moreover only too easy to pass from the legitimate and valid use of a notation to an illegitimate use which no longer corresponds to anything real, and which may even sometimes be quite illogical; this may seem strange when it is a matter of a science such as mathematics, which should have particularly close links with logic, and yet it is only too true that one can note multiple illogicalities in mathematical notions as they are commonly envisaged. One of the most striking examples of these illogical notions is that of the so-called mathematical infinite, which, as we have amply explained on other occasions, is and can in reality be nothing but the indefinite; and one must not believe that this confusion of the infinite and the indefinite is reduced to a simple question of words.

What mathematicians represent by the sign ∞ cannot in any way be the Infinite understood in its true sense; this sign ∞ itself is a formed figure, therefore visibly finite, just as is the circle which some have wished to

make a symbol of eternity, whereas it can only be a figure of a temporal cycle, indefinite only in its order, that is to say of what is properly called perpetuity; and it is easy to see that this confusion of eternity and perpetuity is closely related to that of the infinite and the indefinite. In fact, the indefinite is only a development of the finite; but from the latter one cannot bring forth the Infinite, which moreover cannot be quantitative, any more than it can be anything determined whatsoever, for quantity, being only a special mode of reality, is essentially limited by the infinite. On the other hand, the idea of an infinite number, that is to say, according to the definition given by mathematicians, a number that would be greater than every other number, is an idea contradictory in itself, for however great a number N may be, the number N + 1 will always be greater, by virtue of the very law of formation of the indefinite series of numbers; and from this contradiction there follow many others, as certain philosophers have remarked, who however have not always clearly seen the true scope of this argumentation, for there are some who have believed they could apply to the metaphysical Infinite itself what bears only against the false mathematical infinite, thus committing again, though in the opposite sense, the same confusion as their adversaries.

It is evidently absurd to wish to define the Infinite, for every definition is necessarily a limitation, as the words themselves say clearly enough, and the Infinite is that which has no limits; to seek to make it enter into a formula, that is to say in sum to clothe it with a form, is to strive to make the universal Whole enter into one of the most infinitesimal elements that are comprised in it, which is manifestly impossible; finally, to conceive the Infinite as a quantity is not only to limit it as we have just said, but is moreover, in addition, to conceive it as susceptible of increase or diminution, which is no less absurd. With such considerations, one quickly comes to envisage several infinites which coexist without confusing or excluding one another, infinites which are greater or smaller than other infinites, and even, the infinite no longer sufficing, one invents the “transfinite,” that is to say the domain of numbers greater than the infinite: so many words, so many absurdities, even from the standpoint of simple elementary logic.

It is deliberately that we speak here of "invention," for, if the realities of the mathematical order can, like all other realities, only be discovered and not invented, it is clear that it is no longer the same when one lets oneself be carried, by the effect of a misuse of notation, into the domain of pure fantasy; but how could one hope to make this difference understood by mathematicians who willingly imagine that all exact science is and must be nothing other than a "construction of the human mind," which would assuredly reduce it, if one were to believe them, to being very little indeed?

What we have said for the indefinitely great is likewise true for what is no less improperly called the indefinitely small: however small a number N may be, the number N − 1 will still be smaller; we shall return later to the sense that it is fitting to attribute exactly to this notation. There is therefore in reality neither indefinitely great nor indefinitely small, but one may envisage the series of numbers as increasing or decreasing indefinitely, so that the so-called mathematical infinite is indeed nothing but the indefinite, which, let us repeat once more, proceeds from the finite and is consequently always reducible to it. The indefinite is therefore still finite, that is to say limited; even if we do not know its limits or if we are incapable of determining them, we nevertheless know that these limits exist, for every indefinite is only a certain order of things, which is bounded by the very existence of other things outside it. Thereby, one may evidently envisage a multitude of indefinites; one may even add them to one another or multiply them by one another, which naturally leads to the consideration of indefinites of unequal magnitude, and even of different orders of indefiniteness, whether in the increasing sense or in the decreasing sense. It is easy to understand thereby what the absurdities we were pointing out earlier really signify, and which cease to be absurdities when one replaces the so-called mathematical infinite with the indefinite; but it is well understood that everything that one can thus obtain, just as much as the ordinary finite of which it is never anything but an extension, is without any relation to the Infinite and is always rigorously null in comparison with it.

At the same time, these considerations also show in a precise manner the impossibility of arriving at synthesis by analysis: however much one may successively add to one another an indefinite number of elements, one will never obtain the Whole, because the Whole is infinite and not indefinite; one cannot conceive it otherwise than as infinite, for it could only be limited by something external to it, and then it would no longer be the Whole; if one may say that it is the sum of all its elements, it is only on condition of understanding this word sum in the sense of an integral, and an integral is not calculated by taking its elements one by one; even if one could suppose that one had analytically traversed one or several indefinites, one would not for all that have advanced a single step from the universal point of view, and one would always be exactly at the same point with regard to the Infinite.

All this may moreover be applied analogically to domains other than that of quantity; and the consequence that results immediately from this is that profane science, whose points of view and methods are exclusively analytical, is thereby incapable of surpassing certain limitations; the imperfection here is not inherent simply in its present state, as some would like to believe, but indeed in its very nature, that is to say, in the final analysis, in its lack of principles.

We have said that the series of numbers may be considered as indefinite in both senses, increasing and decreasing; but this still calls for some explanation, for an objection may immediately present itself: namely that true number, what one could call pure number, is essentially integer number; and the series of integers, starting from unity, increases indefinitely, but it develops entirely in a single direction, and thus the other opposite direction, that of indefinite decrease, cannot find its representation there. However, one has been led to consider various kinds of numbers other than integers; these are, it is usually said, extensions of the idea of number, and this is true in a certain way; but at the same time, these extensions are also alterations of it, and this is what mathematicians seem too easily to forget, because their "conventionalism" makes them fail to recognize their origin and their

reason for being. In fact, numbers other than integers always present themselves, first and foremost, as the figuration of the result of operations which are impossible when one places oneself at the point of view of pure arithmetic, the latter being strictly speaking only the arithmetic of integers; but it is not arbitrarily that one comes to consider the result of such operations, instead of simply regarding them as impossible; it is, in a general way, as a consequence of the application that is made of number, which is discontinuous quantity, to the measurement of magnitudes which, like spatial magnitudes for example, are of the order of continuous quantity.

Between these modes of quantity there is a difference of nature such that the correspondence of the one to the other cannot be established perfectly; in order to remedy this to a certain extent, one seeks in some way to reduce the intervals of this discontinuous which is constituted by the series of integers, by introducing between its terms other numbers such as fractional and incommensurable numbers, which would have no meaning outside of this consideration. It must moreover be said that, despite this, there always necessarily remains something of the essentially discontinuous nature of number, which does not allow one to obtain thereby a perfect equivalent of the continuous; one may reduce the intervals as much as one wishes, that is to say in sum reduce them indefinitely, but not suppress them; one is therefore led here again to envisage a certain aspect of the indefinite, and this could find its application in an examination of the principles of infinitesimal calculus, but this is not what we propose to do at present.

With these reservations and under these conditions, one may admit certain of these extensions of the idea of number to which we have just alluded, and give them, or rather restore to them, a legitimate significance; thus we may envisage in particular the inverses of integers, represented by symbols of the form 1/n, and which form the indefinitely decreasing series, symmetrical to the indefinitely increasing series of integers. One must still remark that, although the symbol 1/n may evoke the idea of fractional numbers, the numbers of which it is a matter here are not defined as such; it suffices for us to consider the two series as

constituted by numbers respectively greater and smaller than unity, that is to say as two orders of magnitudes which have in unity their common limit, at the same time as they may be regarded the one and the other as equally issuing from this unity, which is truly the first source of all numbers.

Since we have spoken of fractional numbers, we shall show on this subject that the definition ordinarily given of them is still absurd: fractions cannot be "parts of unity," as one says, for true unity is necessarily indivisible and without parts; arithmetically, a fractional number represents nothing other than the quotient of a division, that is to say of an impossible operation; but this absurdity comes from a confusion between arithmetic unity and what are called "units of measure," which are such only conventionally and which are in reality magnitudes of another order. For example, the unit of length is a certain length chosen for reasons foreign to mathematics, in order that to this magnitude one may correspond a number, in order to be able to measure with respect to it all other lengths; but, by its very nature as a continuous magnitude, this unit of length is always and indefinitely divisible; one may therefore, by comparing other lengths to it, come to consider parts of this unit of measure, but one in no way thereby considers parts of arithmetic unity; and it is only thus that the consideration of fractional numbers is really introduced, as representation of ratios between magnitudes which are not exactly divisible by one another. The measurement of a magnitude is in fact nothing other than the numerical expression of its ratio to another magnitude of the same kind taken as a unit of measure, that is to say at bottom as a term of comparison; and one sees thereby that all measurement is essentially founded on division, which could still give rise to other important observations, but which are outside our subject.

That being said, we may return to the double numerical indefiniteness constituted, in the increasing sense, by the series of integers, and, in the decreasing sense, by that of their inverses; these two series start both from unity, which alone is its own inverse, since $1/1 = 1$. There are moreover as many numbers in one of the series as in the other, so that, if

one considers these two indefinite sets as forming a single sequence, one may say that unity occupies exactly the middle in this sequence of numbers; in fact, to every number n of one of the series there corresponds in the other series a number 1/n, such that $n \times 1/n = 1$; the ensemble of the two inverse numbers, multiplying one another, reproduces unity. If one wished, in order to generalize further, to introduce fractional numbers, instead of considering only the series of integers and that of their inverses as we have just done, nothing would be changed in this respect: one would have on one side all numbers greater than unity, and on the other all numbers smaller than unity; here again, to every number greater than 1 there would correspond in the other group an inverse number smaller than 1, and reciprocally, in such a way that their product would always be equal to unity, and thus there would always be exactly as many numbers in the one as in the other of these two indefinite groups separated by unity.

One may also say that unity, occupying the middle, corresponds to the state of perfect equilibrium, and that it contains within itself all numbers, which issue from it in pairs of inverse or complementary numbers, each of these pairs constituting, by virtue of this complementarism, a relative unity in its indivisible duality; we shall later develop the consequences implied by these various considerations.

(*To be continued.*)